

ACADEMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL STRESS AMONG
UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE COLLEGE STUDENTS: A
LITERATURE REVIEW

By

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A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the
Master of Science Degree
With a Major in

Guidance and Counseling-Mental Health

Approved: 2 Semester Credits

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December, 2001

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ABSTRACT

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Academic and Environmental Stress Among Undergraduate and Graduate Students: A
(Title)
Literature Review

Guidance and Counseling-Mental Health Dr. Bob Salt December, 2001 28
(Graduate Major) (Research Advisor) (Month/Year) (No. of
Pages)

American Psychological Association (APA) Publication Manual

(Name of Style of Manual Used in this Study)

This study is a review of literature and a critical analysis of stress among undergraduate and graduate college students. The two populations that were investigated were undergraduate and graduate students. This review of literature examined various academic, interpersonal, and environmental stressors. This study determined the major sources of stress for undergraduate and graduate students. Some of the areas that were investigated were the stressors that students are encountering; how they handle various stressors, and ways students manage stressors. This area of study is important because both populations are undergoing multiple life changes. This life change can add a strenuous amount of stress on a student. Investigating the different areas where stress occurs can help students learn ways to cope with their stress.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

There have been many studies (Schafer, 1996; Fisher, 1994; Altmaier, 1983; Greenberg & Valletutti, 1980), which have reported strong relationship between stress and college students. Some individuals are more sensitive to some stressors than others; so, the person's characteristics and behavior patterns must be looked at to determine their importance and their vulnerability to stress. The experience of stress in humans is universal, but there are also marked individual differences in how stress is experienced. Stress has been known "to be the fuel the body uses to meet the challenges of our fast-paced modern life; for others, it is the aversive by-product of such a life" (Altmaier, 1983, p. 4). Stress has been associated with major life events, daily life hassles, and changes in life. Stress is created by excessive environmental and internal demands that need constant effort and adjustment.

Many undergraduate students undergo considerable stress due to the demands associated with change: leaving home, becoming independent decision makers, and competing against new standards (Altmaier, 1983). Some graduate and undergraduate students can see these transitions as a positive experience that can be exciting, but some students seem to be threatened by this change. Graduate school is where many graduate students experience a time of increased demands, expectations, and stress (Nelson, Dell'Oliver, Koch, & Buckler, 2001). Stress can affect a student's grades, health, and personal adjustment. How students perceive the immediate environment, their personal lives, and tasks confronting them serves to define, in a unique manner, people and events as potentially dangerous or relatively innocuous (Roberts & White, 1989).

The transition of moving to college and leaving home can be an added stressor for an undergraduate student. There are many first-year students who deal with being

homesick, whether it is mild and self-limiting or profound grief and anxiety. There is a loss of control for students who are attending school and have to adapt to a different climate, new language, behavior, and social customs. The changes and transition are stressful for students because of this new environment. Undergraduate students who are passive and mildly depressed prior to leaving home have been found to be those most likely to show raised levels of homesickness following the move to university (Fisher, 1994).

Many people recognize that stress comes in the form of negative tension that is caused by someone or something. Those who recognize stress as negative tension fail to realize that stress can generate a positive reaction to a stimulus. The positive reaction of stress can drive individuals to achieve and to test their potential to its fullest. Stress can be a positive aspect of learning if students experience stress as a challenge can exhibit an increased capacity to learn (Roberts & White, 1989). Many experiences distress rather than challenge, which can lead students to feel threatened and helpless.

Academic work may reflect some of the high levels of stress that graduate and undergraduate students have reported. Most graduate and undergraduate students experience grade pressures that cause students to have problems with stress. Too much stress can interfere with a student's preparation, concentration, and performance. Yet, positive stress can be helpful to students by motivating them to peak performance. Graduate and undergraduate students also have a fear of failure in relation to their grades and academic work. To fall short of their own or others' expectations in school, job, athletics, or any other activity one risks both external and internal costs: threat to academic or career prospects, disapproval, rejection, humiliation, guilt, and a blow to the

self-esteem (Schafer, 1996). Fear of failure can help motivate the students to prepare and perform well. Yet, sometimes fear of failure can become extreme, which then creates unnecessary stress.

One of the main causes to academic stress is test anxiety. Most graduate and undergraduate students seem to be more emotionally vulnerable due to examinations. Increased anxiety from tests has a debilitating effect on their performance. When information generated by worrying about the test reduces the capacity available for performing the task, the result is that performance breaks down and the result becomes self-confirming (Fisher, 1994). After completing an examination, there is a period of depression when students reflect on their performance and compare it to how their colleagues did. Poor confidence and a perception of poor performance can be an important reason for depression that occurs after examination and no further changes are possible. More emphasis is needed on understanding the impact of examinations on students, on identifying vulnerable individuals, and on the appropriateness of the current examination process (Fisher, 1994).

Some of the responses students have from the stressors can be characterized by a lack of overt skills in handling a stressful situation. This can be marked also by poor performance or avoidance because students lack the skill to deal with these stressors. Stress management can be used to help the students filter out some of the stress they have by changing their behavior. There are a variety of coping skills that can be used to help students with stress that they have. One of the first ways to begin coping and managing stress is, knowing what your physical and emotional limits are. In order to eliminate negative stress that may be occurring in a student's life, he or she needs to identify the

cause of the stressor. A strong psychological adjustment on the part of an individual is known to effectively help offset the dysfunctional effects of stress (Greenberg & Valletutti, 1980). The coping skills selected by the student need to be techniques that most effectively fits his or her individual needs. By reviewing various techniques that are available, students can find the best coping skill(s) that meet their needs.

It is important to investigate the stress that graduate and undergraduate students experience because of the amount of stress that students encounter. College life can be quite stressful for anyone. Being a freshman can make it even more difficult to handle stress as an undergraduate. It is important to look at the different factors of stress to help them cope effectively.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to review some of the common stressors reported by undergraduate and graduate students. Graduate and undergraduate students have some common stressors, yet graduate students seem to have more complex stress than undergraduate students do. A review of literature was conducted to get a clearer

understanding of the various types of stress that can occur in an undergraduate and graduate student's college career.

Definition of Terms

In order to understand clearly, the following term needs to be defined:

Stress- A physical, mental, or emotional reaction resulting from an individual's response to environmental tensions, conflicts, and pressures.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The review of literature will be covering a multitude of areas in relation to undergraduate and graduate college students' stress. The areas that will be discussed for undergraduate students are: freshmen transition, homesickness, test anxiety, course overload, making new friends, and interventions to help cope with the stress students may be experiencing. The areas that will be discussed for graduate students are: transition, family and work commitments, common stressors, test anxiety, course overload, and interventions to manage the stress.

“The concept of stress has been gaining more and more attention in the popular press as well as in professional literature in almost every field” (Altmaier, 1983, p. 3). A review of literature has shown that there is a strong relationship between stress and college students (Ross, Neibling, Heckert, 1999). One important factor to consider when researching stress is to explore which sources of stress are beneficial and which sources are detrimental (Ross et al., 1999). Some individuals are more sensitive or prone to some stressors than others. Stress is caused by environmental and internal demands that need to be adjusted continuously. These environmental and internal demands will vary from undergraduates to graduate students.

Undergraduate Students

Freshmen Transition

Being in a different environment can cause first-year students a great deal of stress. “Individuals often move away from home for the first time during this period and are cut off from family and friends who have provided significant social support in their

lives” (Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alisat, 2000, p. 39). Studies (Altmaier, 1983; Pancer et al., 2000; Fisher, 1994) have shown that the period of greatest stress during their transition to college is in the first weeks and months of classes. The more life changes they go through, the more stress they will likely feel. Students must adjust to being away from home for the first time, maintain a high level of academic achievement, and adjust to a new social environment (Ross et al., 1999). If stress is not dealt with effectively, nervousness and loneliness, as well as sleepiness and excessive worrying may result.

A majority of students who are about to enter college approach the transition with feelings of anticipation. Students are excited about being away from parents and meeting new people. Once students have spent time in college, the positive tone is often replaced by feelings that are negative. The adjustment and transition to college can be a stressor that many, if not all, students experience. Many students go through considerable stress due to the demands associated with the change. Change and transition are stressful because a person can experience a loss of control over the new environment (Fisher, 1994). The new environment will have new properties and the student needs to adapt to the new places, faces, and routines. Some students share increased levels of depression and absent-mindedness within the first few weeks of the first term. “Students who are passive and mildly depressed prior to leaving home have been found to be those most likely to show raised levels of homesickness following the move to college” (Fisher, 1994, p. 46).

Homesickness

There are many first-year students who experience being homesick. Some of

these reasons can be moving to a new environment, not knowing anyone, missing home, and missing family and friends. Homesickness is an unpleasant and stressful experience for students. For some students this is mild, but for others it can lead them to a state of grief, anxiety, and depression. Some students' homesickness diminishes as the academic year passes. However, some other students experienced homesickness throughout their academic life. Homesickness can debilitate a student, making it difficult for them to study or cope effectively with academic life (Fisher, 1994). Academic work may reflect homesickness in a number of ways: the student may be absent minded, non-attentive, or avoid lectures.

Academics

A frequently reported source of stress that college students encounter is receiving a lower grade than they expected. Some students link their self-worth or future with their grades. Students may start doubting their capability or competency in their future careers. Some college students have become so preoccupied by grades that they allowed their health deteriorate.

It has been found that moderate amounts of stress can help motivate students and sometimes increase academic performance. The fear of failing can also help to motivate students to prepare and perform well.

“Stress is marked by overly high performance standards, with high levels of worry, self-criticism of attention while preparing for or taking exams” (Altmaier, 1983, p. 52). Too much stress can interfere with how a student prepares, concentrates, and performs. Some college students do not know how to properly prepare for a test and will perform poorly and are anxious as a result. “The academic workload requires that

students face a series of peak periods such as finals, there is a relatively constant underlying pressure to complete an upcoming assignment” (Hudd, Dumlao, Erdmann, Murray, Phan, Soukas, & Yokozuka, 2000). After completing an exam, there is a period of depression that students may experience which reflects on how they performed and their performance compared to other colleagues. Low self-confidence and a poor perception of performance can be a reason why depression occurs after the test.

Course overload can also cause students a great deal of stress. Having too many courses in a given semester, that are difficult to do well in, is partly due to rushing through to achieve a goal. Many students will take extra courses so they can graduate early. This can cause students to suffer psychologically, physically, socially, and educationally.

Financial Issues/Work

There are many students who have to work while they are attending college. Being a first-year student can cause adjustment to college to be even more difficult. Some students have to work in order to pay their way through college. This can pose a number of hazards for students. There are many times when students have to work late at night and then do not have the time to study. This can then reflect on their academic work and on their grades. Worrying about their financial issues and their grades can be an immense stressor in their academic life. “More time spent at work can encroach on time otherwise available for studying” (Troekel, Barnes, and Egget, 2000, p. 131). As one can see, one stressor can cause another stressor to occur.

Relationships

Another source of stress for college students is making new friends. “Giving up

or changing new friendships and developing new ones is often a stressful activity associated with college life” (Greenberg, 1996, p. 280). It can be stressful for some students to try and find someone they can share things with for the support they used to have. The process of developing new friendships, while integrating themselves into a new social network, is an important step in the developmental process for students. The new network can be an important source of support and well being. New friends require a period of testing to see how much they can self-disclose to that person and feel comfortable at the same time. Going through these processes can be a stressful ordeal.

Family can also be a source of stress for college students. Some families place a great deal of stress on college students by telling them that they need to acquire good grades. There are some students who are the first to attend college in their families, which can place a great deal of pressure on an individual. Families will remind the student of this often, especially if they are not thriving in their courses.

Interventions

There are several interventions that can be used to cope with stress. There are varieties of coping skills that will be introduced to help students cope with stress. In order for students to eliminate the negative stress that they have, they need to identify the source of the stressor(s). The coping skills that are selected by the student need to be techniques that fit their personal needs.

The first intervention that has been known to be helpful is social support. “Social support is helpful because it provides the individual with feedback, validation, and a sense that one can master one’s environment” (Hobfoll, 1988, p. 120). Social support also consists of interactions where meaningful support occurs between people. Students

can use these social supports to help them get through the stress that they are experiencing. Social support has been found to be important in many college students' lives. Social support can help by offering distractions from unhappiness caused by stress, or by helping the student re-work and change personal perspectives on what has happened.

Students who are experiencing homesickness need to have a support system so they can let out their feelings. Many of these students are known to be depressed and this matter needs to be worked with in more detail, whether in a support group or with a counselor. Colleges provide counseling services for students who are having a hard time adjusting or who need help in any way. Getting this support system going is one way to help end the extreme stress that is occurring.

There are two main approaches used to cope with stress. "The first is problem-focused coping, which involves analysis of the main sources of difficulty with a view to seeing whether changes are possible" (Fisher, 1994, p. 85). Using this problem-focused strategy can help the student achieve control over the problem. One of the students' decisions may be to try and reduce their course load by examining what is required of their academics. Students also need to be taught how to handle their stress. Educating the students with programs and workshops can prepare undergraduate and graduate students on how to handle, cope, and deal with stress. This will offer students resources for when they need to seek help or to see how they can minimize their stress.

The second approach to coping with stress is emotion-focused coping. The problems that remain stressful need to be focused on by the individual to prevent further damage. Increasing physical activity or exercise, and other distractions produced by

pleasant activities, may help to decrease the moments of worry and distress. Consulting a trusted friend or a counselor has a considerable advantage in that bringing thoughts and feelings into the open have been found to be beneficial (Fisher, 1994).

“The widespread prevalence and negative impact of stress on students necessitates the development of effective, efficient programs for stress management” (Altmaier, 1983, p. 43). College life can be made less stressful, once students pay attention to managing their college-related stress. It is important to moderate time in order to relax and enjoy activities and hobbies. Limiting the number of courses that students decide to enroll in can help so that student’s do not overload their selves.

Making some minor adjustments can help students to decrease their stress levels. Practicing effective techniques for relaxation has been a good way of reducing stress. Practicing relaxation techniques on a regular basis can help college students manage their stress at a moderate emotional level. It is all a matter of re-arranging their time so that the students can practice their relaxation techniques regularly.

Maintaining good health is also an important way to reduce stress. Exercising can help to release the stress that is built up in the body. The body is prepared to do something physical, and exercise will afford it a health way to make use of this preparation (Greenberg, 1996). Students have access to exercise facilities on campus that can help them. Participating in intramural sports can be a way to also release the stress and have fun at the same time. Eating properly also can help students to reduce stress. Being able to eat on a schedule and not skipping meals can help to reduce stress. Stress can build up when meals are skipped and the nutrition needed for the body is not provided. It is all a matter of changing eating habits that can help reduce some of the

stress.

Undergraduate students recognize the presence of personal and academic stress in their lives. Stressors can be addressed through support groups, counseling, and academic support. Given the effects of stress on health and academic performance, college administrators should consider intertwining stress management training in with orientation activities. Students should be informed of the resources available on campus to help them through their stress. Stress in college cannot be prevented, but we can do a better job at educating students on how to prepare and manage stress.

Graduate Students

“Stress is commonly regarded as a part of the graduate school experience” (Saunders & Balinsky, 1993). Graduate students not only have stress in college, but also within society. Graduate students must meet the demands of life outside of college. There are some common stressors that graduate students tend to experience while in college. Some of these common stressors are: transition to graduate school, test anxiety, academic performance, family commitments, and finances. Graduate school has been known to be a time of multiple and rapid changes in life for young adults. “It was reasoned that more experienced students should be less stressed by the demands of graduate school” (Kreger, 1995, p. 345). Stress in graduate school has been related to poor academic performance, coping problems, poor family relations, and dropping out of graduate school (Saunders & Balinsky, 1993). Graduate students may experience an increase in emotional difficulties and high levels of stress in their graduate school experience. Graduate study often leads to the postponement of various life events. “Moving away from the family of origin, forming long-term relationships including

marriage and parenthood are actions that, while not impossible to combine with graduate school, may be postponed because the individual feels that they will interfere in some way with the graduate work” (Arnstein, Backus, Eddy Liptzin, Notman, Reich, Reid, Siggins, Silber, Silverman, Wenger, & Stauffer, 1999, p. 46).

Transition

“According to past research, students report high levels of stress and anxiety during the transition period” (Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2000, p. 637). Transition to graduate school may vary from student to student. Some students may be starting graduate school straight out of undergraduate college. Some of these students may feel intimidated by the older students in their classes. The amount of experience that older students have can affect how they may adjust to graduate school. If the graduate students have been working for a period of time before they go to graduate school, they could have an easier time adjusting because of the knowledge they have obtained in the working world.

Other students may be older and are starting graduate school after working for several years. Some older students may find it more difficult to return to student status, especially when their teachers are the same age or younger than they are (Arnstein et al., 1999). There are many graduate students that are married and are juggling school and a marriage. Some students have to move from their spouses in order to obtain their degrees. This can cause the transition for them to be rough.

Financial Issues

Finances can be a strain for a graduate student. Hudson and O’Regan (1994) found that financial concerns cause significant stress for graduate students and produce

high levels of stress. Many students prefer to undertake graduate study on a full-time basis, rather than on a part-time basis. Sources of money then become important for the student. “There are sources within the university for loan and jobs that become part of the educational program, such as teaching assistantships” (Arnstein et al., 1999, p. 48).

Graduate programs provide financial aid with assistantships or fellowships. Some of the other students support themselves through ancillary jobs. “The income from such jobs may solve their fiscal crisis, but students often find themselves exhausted physically and distracted mentally” (Arnstein et al., 1999, p. 52). Personal loans are an additional source of financial support for graduate students.

Many of the older students who return to graduate school after working and living comfortably may have a different standpoint financially than those who have come directly from undergraduate studies. They may find themselves becoming more pinched for money. They too may not have adequately prepared themselves for this change in their lifestyle. This change in their lifestyle may also make planning for a secure retirement problematic. This can cause the older students to have all the more stress in their lives.

When students start to have financial troubles, their outlook on life may be dramatically affected. Many studies (Hodgson & Simoni, 1995; Arnstein et al., 1999 and Saunders & Balinsky, 1993) have found that financial problems during graduate study were strongly related to psychological distress. Financial constraints are a reality for almost all graduate students.

Family Commitments

Many students have career and family commitments that make full-time student

status difficult (Hudson & O'Regan, 1994). Some older students may have other commitments that interfere with their graduate work such as childcare or caring for aging parents. These all require time and energy. Students may build up a great deal of stress due to these added factors while in graduate school. "Depression and loneliness can interfere with the student's performance and be a source of conflict for both partners (Arnstein et al., 1999, p. 59). The impact graduate school has on marriages may be different from one couple to another. The impact of these difficulties may not have been anticipated or considered beforehand (Arnstein et al., 1999).

Sometimes a couple may end up in two different cities because of the school being in a different city than their spouse's job. This can add a great deal of stress on a marriage when the two cannot live together. Sometimes this occurs because one spouse may have finished graduate school sooner than the other or the other did not choose to go to graduate school.

If the couple has children, the household responsibilities may become more difficult to maintain. There has to be a great deal of flexibility in the family so that they can complete the program. Poor family relations can cause a student to have an even greater amount of stress during their graduate study.

Test Anxiety

Two of the main components to having test anxiety are worry and emotionality (Sapp, 1996). Those graduate students who have heightened test anxiety tend to perform worse. This is not always true though. Some students tend to work better when they are under pressure. There are various reasons why some graduate students may experience test anxiety. Some of these reasons are due to the age differences in the graduate school.

The older students may feel a little lost since they have been in the school setting for years. Younger students may feel intimidated by the older students due to the fact that they are more experienced. “Graduate students tend to be older and to lack recent experience in taking exams” (Sapp, 1996, p. 80). Grade competition is also a stressor that is related to test anxiety. “Graduate education is competitive” (Rittner & Trudeau, 1997, p. 148). Getting involved in a study group could help an individual release some of their anxiety by asking their colleagues questions that they are uncertain of. To alleviate test-anxiety, students should not compete with one another (Dukelow, 1980).

Course Load

Coursework can add a great deal of stress in a graduate students life. Most graduate students know what they need to have in order to stay in graduate school. When a graduate student first starts, they will notice that the readings for each class are double from what they were in undergraduate work (Rittner & Trudeau, 1997). Some graduate students will take the maximum credit load that their programs will allow them so that they can finish sooner. This can cause a great deal of stress for graduate students having 4-5 classes and having readings, assignments, and papers/projects to do. “Increased coursework stress among students with higher academic success may be related to higher self-expectations for maintaining their high academic standing” (Nelson, et. al, 2001, p. 766).

Interventions

One of the first interventions that research (Saunders & Balinsky, 1993) suggests is a cognitive approach. The cognitive approach enables the student to gain skills to cope with these stressors and to better control reactions to these stressors. This cognitive

approach is a good beginning point for graduate students to learn about managing stress (Saunders & Balinsky, 1993). This cognitive approach helps to identify cognitive aspects of stress specific to graduate students. “Cognitive approaches have been reported to successfully alleviate stress and emotional disorders such as depression” (Saunders & Balinsky, 1993, p. 193). The cognitive approach can also help graduate students to be able to manage their stress more effectively. A cognitive approach is not the only way to handle stress. There are multiple approaches that are more effective due to the complexity of stress and stress reactions.

Another intervention that has been found to be successful for graduate student stress is relaxation therapy. Relaxation techniques can be used to try and calm any muscles that may be tight. Also, this form of therapy can be helpful to clear and relax your mind. Relaxation therapy can assist students by having them think about relaxing their bodies. Sapp (1996) found in his study that for worry and test anxiety, relaxation therapy was the most effective treatment for graduate student stress. Research has shown that “relaxation procedures are useful in reducing test anxiety in students” (Sapp, 1996, p. 83).

Another type of intervention is supportive counseling. According to Sapp (1996), the goal in supportive counseling is to provide support and to promote problem solving, which can be done through empathic reflecting and listening. This form of therapy helps graduate students come up with different methods of handling their stress or anxiety, especially for test anxiety. Counseling can help students to talk about their stress and try to be able to pinpoint when the stress may have started and why. Counseling is a way that a student can discuss their stresses and learns how to handle their stress more

effectively. A fourth intervention that has been found to be useful is social support. Having good social support from family and friends can help to alleviate some of the stress that Graduate students may be experiencing. Strong social support is associated with low to moderate effects on stressors (Nelson et. al, 2001). Nelson (2001) found that increased interpersonal contact and social support were closely related to decreasing stress. Faculty support can also be useful for alleviating stress. Academic advisors can possibly help students with some of the academic stress that they may be experiencing. The academic advisors can help graduate students with problems that they may be experiencing in a class. This is a helpful way to alleviate some of the stress graduate students have.

Graduate students need to be more informed of the resources that are available. There has seems to be more resources readily available for undergraduate students rather than graduate students. Given the effects of stress on health and on academic performance, graduate students need to be more informed of resources. Also, in order to help relieve some stress of graduate students, more funding needs to be available. Financial problems are an area many graduate students have to face.

CHAPTER THREE

Discussion

Summary of Study

A review of literature was completed to get a clearer understanding of the stress that undergraduate and graduate students have experienced. Undergraduate and Graduate students seem to have some similar stressors. Many of these stressors that are similar are mostly college related. Graduate students tend to be older and therefore are experiencing more life changes at the same time. Undergraduates are usually younger and are not experiencing as many life changes.

There are a variety of interventions that can be used to help handle stress more effectively for undergraduate and graduate students. There were some interventions that

were similar and some that were different. For the most part, these interventions could be used for both populations. In order to get the most from the interventions that were discussed the interventions listed with the populations are most effective according to research findings.

Conclusions

This study revealed some of the differences and similarities between graduate and undergraduate student stress. This study seemed to be supportive that graduate students have more stress in their lives while completing school than undergraduates. Graduate students seem to have more life changes that are occurring while they are in school. Stress cannot be prevented, but there seem to be some interventions available that undergraduate and graduate students can acquire to help them relieve some the stress they may be experiencing. This literature review was help to show the interventions that can be used to help reduce the stress level.

Recommendations

There were some limitations that were found when completing a literature review. There are not many studies done on graduate student stress. There seem to be some studies that have been done, but not comparing their stress to undergraduate student stress. There were only a few resources that were found on comparing both of these populations to one another.

Due to time constraints a study was not conducted to compare the stress levels of graduate and undergraduate student stress. Being there has not been much research done on comparing these two populations, this would be a study that could be pursued in the future when there are not any time constraints.

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